DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 757 CE 065 592

AUTHOR Randell, Shirley
TITLE A Current Appraisal of Adult Education Activity in Australia with a Focus on Community-Based Education and Work among Women and Aboriginal People.
PUB DATE 20 Nov 93
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (Dallas, TX, November 20, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Access to Education; *Adult Education; *Community Education; Community Involvement; *Educational Change; Educational Development; Educational Opportunities; Equal Education; Foreign Countries; *Indigenous Populations; *Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

As adult education in Australia becomes a priority, emphases have changed. Structure has also changed, as traditional providers of adult education have begun to adjust to changing political, economic, and social realities. Changes in community-based education have occurred as government involvement has provided more funds and begun to encroach on the capacity of local voluntary agencies to maintain the independence of their work for and on behalf of their own communities. The seduction of targeted government funds and the reduction of infrastructure grants have begun to move community sector objectives towards the priorities of governments. Communities must maintain control to secure and develop futures for the local people. Women's studies have changed dramatically over the past 30 years. They too have been localized through the work of neighborhood houses. In fact, education available for women has greatly increased from a limited predominantly white, middle class model to a range of courses and programs suiting the needs of women from different classes, different ethnic backgrounds, and different working careers. The mainstream educational system (schooling, Technical and Further Education, and tertiary) has often failed Aboriginal people. One of the greatest challenges in the present and future must be helping the indigenous people of Australia to learn what they want to learn in a way that is suitable for them. (YLB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 366 757

A Current Appraisal of Adult Education Activity in Australia with a Focus on Community-based Education and Work Among Women and Aboriginal People

Roundtable presentation at the 1993 annual conference of the
American Association for Adult and Continuing Education
Winds of Change: Opportunities and Challenges for Adult Education
20 November 1993, Dallas, Texas

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Dr Shirley Randell AM
Director
Council of Adult Education
Melbourne, Australia

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S Randell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

INTRODUCTION

The education of adults in Australia in the 1990s is becoming the priority that it is in some other countries. This has meant changes in emphases; it has also meant changes in structure as traditional providers of adult education, many of whom have existed for decades, have begun to adjust to changing political, economic and social realities.

This paper deals with changes in three major aspects of adult education activity in Australia at the present time: community-based education and work among women and Australia's indigenous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Community-based Education

Adult education in Victoria largely originated in community structures. Government involvement and, through the purse, ultimately government intervention, came late, although public sector bureaucracies tend to act as though they have been there forever. That, however, is just one of their legitimising mechanisms. Why did adult education begin in voluntary community organisations? The simple fact is that, like many other things that people want, the only way to get it was to do it for themselves. While government involvement in adult education is a relatively late phenomenon, government involvement in the schools sector, including technical schools, and in universities was already well advanced in the 19th century. Much of adult education, as I have said already, emanated from emancipatory concepts, commencing with the working class and moving on from there. The affluence of the 1960s and 70s saw adult education begin to grow in response to quality of life and personal growth concerns.

Real government intervention took place after it became obvious that community-based organisations could actually deliver government education priorities and deliver them cheaply and efficiently, that is governments could get good outcomes at little cost. This began with literacy and basic education programs and intensified when it became apparent that the education of adults in all areas and at all levels had to be a national priority if Australia were to maintain international competitiveness in an era of shifting economic fortunes. Community-based adult education is now considered to be a partnership between government and communities in the delivery of educational programs that suit them both. This is substantially different from state-provided education which, while it has community input, is largely controlled by public servants and politicians. The community-based sector is still predicated on actual control from the community through local voluntary committees, with some resources provided by government.

CE 065 592

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

This relationship is problematic, however. No doubt government involvement has provided more funds; it has also begun to encroach on the capacity of such organisations to maintain the independence of their work for and on behalf of their own communities. The seduction of targeted government funds and the reduction of infrastructure grants has begun to move community sector objectives towards the priorities of governments. While such priorities might be useful on a national or state level there are no guarantees that they are always what is needed on a local level. At a time when local communities are increasingly at the whim of powers outside their control, and sometimes almost outside their comprehension, when state and national governments seem increasingly unable to protect their citizens from the ravages of globalising and internationalising systems, then as much power and as many resources as possible have to be returned to local people so that they might secure and develop futures for themselves, their families and their communities.

So the everpresent pendulum swing between centralising and localising power, the tension between overweening government bureaucracies and local communities must begin to alter in favour of the local. This is important for two reasons; one I have already mentioned is that local economic, cultural and social survival is becoming a critical matter as national borders and national governments become less relevant to the construction of local economies, cultures and societies. Secondly, true democratic functioning requires local controls to be in place to counteract the resources and influence of the state. The threat to democracies is no longer danger from totalitarian regimes; it is the power of the state and of giant multinational corporations.

Community-based adult education is not easy to uphold. Even under the most propitious circumstances it is not always easy to maintain voluntary dedication and motivation. When it is subject to external pressure, particularly pressure backed with the might and threat of government resources and the public sector, it can be even more difficult to sustain. Fortunately community-based adult education is well entrenched in Victoria and there is reason to be confident that, with due vigilance, communities might well be able to maintain control. The importance of so doing is likely to be emphasised by the changing fortunes of the international economic system.

Adult Education and Women

Recently enrolment statistics at the Council of Adult Education (CAE) indicated that women comprise over 75 per cent of our student enrolments in 1993. Outside formal education and training, adult education in Australia is predominantly a sector for women. Adult education was not established as a sector for women; it just turned out that way. Why?

- The curriculum content is obviously attractive to women.
- Attendance at adult education programs is a legitimised form of social intercourse for women.
- Many courses are run during the day, an attractive time for women with other commitments.
- Women are attracted by the female even feminist ambience of adult education.
- The opportunities provided for radical theorising and practice in adult education organisation and program delivery are attractive to women.
- Adult education organisations have attracted women as staff which perpetuates many of these other characteristics.
- The popular neighbourhood house movement in Australia targeted women for its programs.

- Until relatively recently the participation rates for women in universities and, in particular, technical and further education were lower than men's, and adult education provided an alternative.

There are obviously other characteristics that explain the popularity of adult education but probably no more that purport to explain its particular popularity for women. All of these characteristics obviously influence participation, but to suggest that adult education curriculum content is attractive to women begs the question somewhat as to what particular curriculum content and at what time.

It is probably safe to assume that there at least three strands or themes running through adult education for women at this time. They are:

1 emancipation
2 personal development
3 vocational education.

Emancipation is probably the best known but probably the least understood of the current traditions. Adult education has part of its origins in 19th century concepts of emancipation. Such ideas have been present throughout the 20th century and surfaced again in the 1970s as part of the incipient women's movement. Curriculum for women in the 1970s certainly stressed liberation. It was salutary for me to read a CAE program guide from 1975 and compare it to today. In 1975 we had under the heading Women's Studies courses such as How Women are Changing their Lives and Why, The Rise of Feminism, Radical Education and Women, Feminist Literature 1 and 2, Women and Health, A Sociology of Women, Women and the Media, The Housebound Woman and so on. Today's program guide has a heading, Women's Issues, which has under it titles such as Compulsive Eating: Breaking Free, Me and My Shadow, Personal Style, Self Confidence and Assertiveness for Women, Self Defence Options for Women, and Single Again. The later courses certainly reflect trends of our times but it is interesting that compared to the 1970s there is nothing that suggests critical pedagogy, very little that tries to understand the situation of women in terms of the socio-political conditions of the time. Because our programs are organised on a supply and demand basis we can assume that the courses offered in the 1970s are no longer popular and what is offered now, programs that emphasise the construction of the self and image, have strong current appeal.

Indeed while women were encouraged to understand themselves in the 1970s against the entrenched structures of patriarchy, today there seems to be broad acceptance of current values and a willingness to work within the dominant economic paradigm. Hence we have many programs that relate to jobs and work and this emphasis reflects a major transition over the last few years, one that mirrors the problematic economic circumstances for Australia at this time. Certainly there are women who continue to struggle against oppressive and restrictive social structures but such work does not appear to have the drive and passion of 20 years ago—neither does it appear to be as well received.

The bulk of women's programs today are in the areas of personal development and vocationalism. A major transition of the last generation has been the movement of women into the workforce. I noticed a report from Britain recently that suggested this phenomenon had been so strong that in some local government areas there were actually more women in the workforce than men. In Australia the phenomenon is the same and programs that improve and develop job skills and attitudes for women are required. Such learning now incorporates language and literacy programs that would at one time have been considered emancipatory in

that they were based on a Freirean model of conscientisation. Women would have learned language and literacy skills in the context of understanding broader societal power structures. That is no longer necessarily the case; particularly within those programs that are predicated upon government grants. Government grant programs are becoming increasingly targeted toward particular work outcomes. Certainly adult learning for women from non-English speaking groups takes special forms but the outcomes of such programs these days are very much oriented towards work.

The emphasis on personal development has been in those programs that can answer questions, provide directions, create understanding and supply meaning. This appears to be a response to the decline in strength of the traditional means by which we have identified ourselves; family, class, politics, religion, even gender. All people are looking for ways through which they can find meaning in a world where anchors are slippery and fail to hold. Adult education helps provide such meaning, both through its diverse course content and its emphasis on tools such as life planning.

Adult education also does much of the work related to the contribution of non-paid labour in the community; courses on house and family care and voluntary community work. There is a danger in these women's agendas that are not necessarily the agendas of society. We have to make sure that the work we do is such that it cannot be consigned to the margins as mere 'hobby and leisure' activities.

Aboriginal Adult Education

Australian Aborigines are among the oldest known consistent occupiers of a landmass on earth. At the time the cave paintings of Lascaux in what is now France were rendered, Aborigines had been carving rock motifs and depicting symbols and scenes from their lives in caves and rock niches throughout Australia for 40 000 years. At the time of early Greek and Egyptian civilisations, Aborigines had been at home on the Australian continent for 60 000 years. The actual timing of the arrival of Aboriginal people is Australia is a matter of debate, mainly to more recently arrived Australians. For Australia's first people do not overly concern themselves with dates, preferring to contain their history in the timeless myths and legends of their Dreaming. But if there is a major calendar date of critical importance to them it would have to be 1788, the arrival of the first permanent European colonists in what is now Sydney Cove. From that time onwards Aboriginal culture was placed under enormous strain, to the point where it and Aborigines themselves were at risk of complete destruction. Even though Aboriginal people are still at risk in the 1990s, recent events tend to hold out some hope for a reconciliation between Australia's indigenous people and more recent settlers.

The Australian bicentenary of 1988, the celebration of European settlement of Australia, was not welcomed at all by Aboriginal people who saw a deep irony in celebrating 200 years of oppression. (This was akin to some indigenous American responses to the 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage of discovery.) Yet the bicentenary in Australia was useful in that it provoked belated recognition of the destitution and destruction that had been the lot of Australia's Aborigines since the white settlement of Australia. This has been capitalised upon by the Prime Minister of Australia, Paul Keating, who has begun moves towards restitution and reconciliation based on concepts of justice, equality and a recognition of the values of Aboriginal people.

Nevertheless the general quality of life of Australian Aborigines remains extremely low. Infant mortality for Aborigines is much greater than that of white groups; health problems such as the eye disease trachoma and dietary ailments such as diabetes are far more common. Alcohol and other chemical dependencies remain a widespread scourge among Aboriginal communities. Yet things do appear to be changing.

One of the more prevalent shifts has been a concern to return to Aboriginal people the power and the resources to control their own lives. At times this has been little more than rhetoric; sometimes it has been symbolic, as in the return to the traditional owners of artefacts held in museum collections for many years or land that had great spiritual significance, such as Uluru (formerly Ayers Rock) in the centre of the Australian desert. Increasingly, however, the community seems more and more willing to cede to Aboriginal people some of the processes and means through which they can determine their individual and collective futures. This is entirely appropriate given that 205 years of European settlement in Australia have produced a largely dependent Aboriginal culture.

Education is one of the processes involved. Yet because education is largely a state responsibility it is not easy to make generalisations about Aboriginal adult education throughout the nation. As with other forms of education in Australia at this time, it is very much a political issue and the various states differ in their attitude and approach to the matter. What I will say now risks oversimplifying the subject; the alternative, detailing individual state responses, risks complicating it enormously. Adult education for Aboriginal people in some ways is no different from the education of any dispossessed group. It provides the means to social, cultural and economic survival—all of which are inextricably woven together. When Aboriginal people are allowed to identify their learning needs, as opposed to them being identified by others, they seem to fall into three distinct areas:

1 basic education—those programs that can help access further education and employment and help people live better lives in their communities: literacy and numeracy, health programs, family skills;
2 political education—the skills required to work within the existing political structures in order to improve matters for Aboriginal people: lobbying, negotiating, meeting procedures, activist skills;
3 community development—to make local communities more self-sufficient and efficient: enterprise development, obtaining and using capital, administration and book-keeping (Foley, 1987).

Across Australia, in various institutions and in diverse ways, Aboriginal people are using such adult education to claw back their dignity and independence. This is a faltering path and one that is being set out upon more with hope and optimism than with any massive evidence of outcomes to justify it yet. Moreover it is not made easier by inherent white conservatism and blatant commercial interests which see a threat to their mining and agricultural profits in Aboriginal independence, particularly if that means land rights. The recent establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), a national and regional body with significant resources and powers, continues to progress Aboriginal issues and provides a greater voice in the community on behalf of its clientele.

It has generally been recognised that Aboriginal adult education works best if it is organised through institutions operated and controlled by Aboriginal people. The interests of mainstream institutions and Aborigines are generally not the same. The interests of all Aboriginal people are not the same, reflecting rural-urban, modern-traditional and generational splits as well as

the fact that Aborigines have always been dispersed tribal peoples rather than one united community. The establishment of training and educational institutions exclusively for Aboriginal people has been an important advance. Mainstream organisations such as my own, the CAE, have provided many opportunities for non-indigenous Australians to learn about Aboriginal culture. When it comes to working with and for Aborigines, however, we work through an Aboriginal staff member who has extensive contacts with the Aboriginal community and can help us make what we offer more relevant to their needs.

It is far too early to feel confident about the future for Aboriginal people in Australia. Yet signs are there that non-indigenous Australians are becoming committed to providing Aborigines with the same rights, freedoms and privileges that they enjoy. Recent legislative changes in Australia that encourage and allow Aboriginal people to claim and occupy lands which sustained the social, economic and spiritual life of their ancestors over many thousands of years can only be a positive sign. Adult education is not the only answer but it continues to play a significant role.

Conclusion

This has been a brief and cursory appraisal of three very important areas of adult education in Australia. No doubt every age assumes that it lives in a period of rapid transition. Even so-called static periods were subject to economic surges and depressions. The winds of change blowing across the fields of adult education will change the landscape of the past but probably not beyond recognition.

The trends in community education indicate government funding is directing local interest towards national priorities such as employment. The perceived, corresponding loss of local control may lessen the local enthusiasm which has so often appeared as essential voluntary support for adult education. But this does not mean that local power will be completed denied. Indeed local forces also recognise the importance of some of the national agenda.

Women's studies have changed dramatically over the past 30 years. They too have been localised through the work of neighbourhood houses. In fact, education available for women has greatly increased from a limited predominantly white, middle class model to a range of courses and programs suiting the needs of women from different classes, different ethnic backgrounds and different working careers. Adult education has also been taken up, and not infrequently put down, as part of the national agenda. The fact that increasing numbers of women are engaging in adult education suggests that they recognise it as a tool for their advantage.

The mainstream tripartite educational system (schooling, TAFE and tertiary) has often failed Aboriginal people. One of the great challenges in our present and our future must be helping the indigenous people of Australia to learn what they want to learn in a means that is suitable for them.

And that note is perhaps the appropriate one on which to conclude. Adult education in Australia has always been about delivering learning and skills in a way suitable for the learner and in response to an expressed need. Unlike that 'other' form of education, government dictated curricula, which teaches what the public servant or the educator thinks people **need** to know, adult education has consistently taught what people **want** to know. What people want to know will inevitably change. As educators we expect it and bend with the winds of change, reaching out to our sisters and brothers so that we can all stand tall together.

References

Foley, Griff. **Towards an Aboriginal-controlled Adult Education**. Haymerted, Institute of Technical Education, 1987.

McMaster, M and S Randell. Equity and opportunity in adult learning. In Harris R. and P. Willis. **Striking a Balance : adult and community education in Australia towards 2000.** Centre for Human Resources Studies, University of South Australia, Adelaide, 1992.

Mason, R and S Randell. Local effectiveness and the democratic process. In **Adult Education for a Democratic Culture,** Melbourne, Council of Adult Education, 1992.

Randell, S.K. The Council of Adult Education: a challenge to the adult, community and further education sector, **Network of Women in Further Education Newsletter**, June 1992.

Randell, S.K. The Council of Adult Education and its contribution to the education of indigenous people in Australia 1950-1993, **ASPBAE courier** 56: 5-19, 1993.